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T H E S I S

Cotton Mather and the Superstitions
of the
Early Period of American Literature

Submitted by

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COTTON MATHER AND THE SUPERSTITIONS OF THE
EARLY PERIOD OF AMERICAN LITERATURE.

In order to understand the circumstances existing in the colonies during the early history of America, it is necessary to discover the causes of the Puritan exodus from England. Richard Mather, while yet in England, presented the following arguments in favor of departure for the New World. Such an action, he says, would be (1) a removal from a corrupt church to a purer; (2) a removal from a place where the truth and the professors of it are persecuted, unto a place of more quiet and safety; (3) a removal from a place where all the ordinances of God cannot be enjoyed, unto a place where they may; (4) a removal from a church where the discipline of the Lord Jesus Christ is wanting, unto a church where it may be practiced; (5) a removal from a place where the ministers of God are unjustly inhibited from the execution of their functions, to a place where they may more fully execute the same; (6) a removal from a place where there are fearful signs of desolation, to a place where one may have well-grounded hope of God's protection. ⁽¹⁾ Although this summary is that of Richard Mather, it may well be accepted as typical of the convictions of all the Puritan fathers. These reasons, as may be readily seen, are all based upon the hope of

(1) Barrett Wendell: "Cotton Mather, The Puritan Priest" - Page 17

finding a place where Church and State would be in perfect harmony.

The most authoritative representative of the ideals of Puritanism in its theocracy was John Cotton. As he had left his church in England and had chosen exile rather than submission to unscriptural practices, he felt it his Christian duty to encourage a theocracy as near as might be to that which was in Israel. The priest must be set above the magistrate; the citizen of the commonwealth must become the subject of Jehovah; the sovereignty of the state must yield to the sovereignty of God. The Puritans did not realize that, at the very beginning, their ideas of a theocratic government were the exact opposite to those of a democratic. They were determined to base their new government on the Scriptures only. And the active ministers of the gospel should interpret the Scripture. These ministers were to be approved by the members of the church, especially by those whose public profession of religious experience had proved their regeneration. The elect of God became the electors of God's chosen. John Cotton, when the people were perplexed and divided over civil constitution and requested him to suggest convenient laws "from the laws wherein God governed his ancient people", recommended among other things "that none should be electors, nor elected,

except such as were visible subjects of our Lord Jesus Christ, personally confederated in our churches". In this and many other ways he strove for a theocracy as nearly as might be to that of Israel. Barrett Wendell says: "Though for more than a generation the theocratic principles of John Cotton prevailed and none were freemen but the members of the church, there was neither among the churches nor among their members a unanimity which prevented voters from voting, now and then, as they pleased. In the first thirty years of their life in America, the theocratic spirit was strong enough to establish the franchise, to banish Roger Williams and Mrs. Hutchinson, to hang the Quakers; the democratic spirit meanwhile had established and maintained civil order and had been forced by the presence of the Indians and other harassing neighbors into strengthening demonstrations of military power, as well as into that confederacy of New England - dear to lovers of union. The democratic spirit made Sir Henry Vane, Governor in 1637; a year or two later the theocratic drove him in disgust from the colony. It was the democratic spirit that stopped the hanging of the Quakers before Cotton Mather was born".⁽¹⁾

When John Cotton found himself confronted by signs of democratic unrest in Boston, his

(1) Barrett Wendell: "Cotton Mather, the Puritan Priest" - Page 23

course seemed to him clear. The desire for liberty he regarded as a sinful prompting of the natural man, a godless denial of the righteous authority. If democracy were indeed a Christian form of government, it was strange that nowhere did God designate the democratic as the perfect type, but the theocratic. To the Puritan he argued logically. "It is better that the commonwealth be fashioned to the setting forth of God's house, which is his church; than to accommodate the church frame to the civil state. Democracy, I do not conceive that God ever ordained as a fit government either for church or commonwealth. If the people be governors, who shall be governed? As for monarchy and aristocracy, they are both of them clearly approved and directed in scripture, yet so as referreth the sovereignty to himself and setteth up Theocracy in both, as the best form of government in the commonwealth as well as in the church."⁽¹⁾

Holding such views his duty was plain - to check every movement towards a democratic organization. The Synod of 1637 set a ban upon all heretical innovations and thereafter Massachusetts settled down to a rigid orthodoxy. The spirit of conservatism took possession of the native generation. The native ministers inherited the theocratic ideal. Increase Mather, the leader of the

(1) "Cambridge History of American Literature"
Pages 32 - 52.

second generation, believed that if the theocratic ideal of ecclesiastical control of secular affairs were to maintain itself against the growing opposition, the ministers must fortify themselves by a closer organization. They must speak as a unit in determining church policies. Above all they must guard against those who were slipping into the pulpit to destroy the people. As a result the synodical organization was established.

Faith was based on a hope that the government of the visible world might, by the grace of God, be brought into harmony with the system by which God governed the invisible. Hence the Puritans guarded their theocracy jealously, fearing that anything which opposed it was instigated by the devil. Democracy was so diametrically opposed to theocracy that, to the theologian's mind, it could be nothing else but the result of the plot of Satan and his followers. Thus the ministers must unite to forestall its inroads--hence, the synods. So, too, the supposed plot of Anti-Christ was a direct attack upon the theocratic government. The legions of the devil were desperate at the invasion of their territory by the Puritans because America was the last place on earth where they could dwell, having already been driven out of European countries. Therefore, they

fiercely attacked the Chosen People, the Puritans. The forays of this last remnant of the devil's band might take any form--an open raid as in the case of the Indian scourges, or an attack by supernatural powers as in the case of witchcraft. In either circumstance, the attack was that of the devil upon God's Elect and upon God's chosen form of government established by his Elect. Thus, the belief in the Anti-Christ plot and in the witchcraft superstition gained prominence as theocracy gave way to democracy because the Puritans, even those of the native generation, were steeped in the idea that these two movements were undermining God's plan of government as stated in the Bible and as interpreted by the ministers.

The Puritan attitude towards life arose directly from their religious faith. They knew their God intimately and they knew His will. Before the beginning of the world, He unchangeably ordained whatsoever would come to pass; he knew that of all mankind some were predestined unto everlasting life and others were foreordained unto everlasting death. Due to Adam's and Eve's disobedience, by which they became dead in sin, their corruption was imputed to all their posterity. But God had sent His son, Jesus Christ, to earth to suffer in order that

the Elect, by rebirth in Him, might enter heaven. There being no certain sign of salvation, the best the Puritans could hope for was to discover within themselves various signs of acceptance, chief of which was spiritual enlightening of the soul, at times so vivid as to be construed as the actual presence of God. But in all these signs, man was altogether passive; it was God working through him. Even in the Elect, sufficient corruption remained to keep up a continual war of the flesh against the spirit. The typical Puritan life, far from being hopelessly drab and barren, consisted of a vitally passionate endeavor to conform his thoughts and actions so exactly to the will of God that in time he would find himself overcome with the blessed assurance of regeneration. But no wile of the devil was more frequent than that which deceived men into believing themselves regenerate when in truth they were not. The task of assuring oneself of election could end only with life. Above all, men must never forget that the true will of God was revealed directly or by implication only and wholly in Scripture. Incessant study of the Scripture was the sole means by which any man could assure himself that his will was really exerting itself through the mediatory power of Christ in true harmony with the will of God. As the

devil was active and set all sorts of deceptive snares, every material benefit or success could be either a blessing from God or a trap set by the devil, and every adversity or fleshly lust could be a test of faith administered by the former or a triumph won by the latter.

That Cotton Mather thoroughly accepted this creed may be seen by the following outline of "God's Eternal Decree" taken from Book V of the
(1)
"Magnalia Christi Americana".

- (1) "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained unto everlasting death.
- (II) These angels and men thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed, and their number is so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or diminished.
- (III) Those of mankind that are predestinated unto life, God, before the foundation of the world was laid, according to his eternal and immutable purpose, and the secret counsel and good pleasure of his will, hath chosen in Christ unto everlasting glory, out of his mere free grace and love, without any foresight of faith and good works, or perseverance in either of them or any other thing in the creature, as conditions or causes moving him thereunto, and all to the praise of His glorious grace.
- (IV) As God hath appointed the elect unto glory, so hath he by the eternal and most free purpose of his will, foreordained all the means therunto; wherefore they who are elected being fallen in Adam are redeemed by Christ, are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his spirit working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power through faith unto salvation.

Neither are any others redeemed by Christ, or effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified and saved, but the elect only.

- (V) The rest of mankind God was pleased to pass by and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.
- (VI) The doctrine of this high mystery of predestination is to be handled with special prudence and care, that men attending the will of God may from the certainty of their effectual vocation be assured of their eternal election.
- (VII) The most wise, righteous and gracious God doth oftentimes leave for a season his own children to manifold temptations and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption, and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled, and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends."

To the Puritans God was a strict ruler, acting directly in earthly affairs, and much that later came to be regarded simply as the operation of natural law was held to be evidence of the power of the Lord manifested in the world. For instance, Cotton Mather in his "The Christian Philosopher" shows that the world is so beautiful a place that it is a proof that God exists, and scientific research is the source of man's knowledge of this beauty and wonder. Nature was rather awful than beautiful, a manifestation of God's dread power rather than of his love for man-

kind.

To comprehend thoroughly the attitude of the Puritan mind, we must realize that the planting of churches in New England is the beginning of God's final campaign against Anti-Christ. Belief in witches was still common throughout the civilized world. In New England, furthermore, there was a popular theory that the legions of the devil, largely driven out of Christian Europe, had taken refuge in the wilds of America; and that dismayed and furious at the Puritans' attack upon their final stronghold, they had marshalled their forces for one desperate assault upon the New England theocracy. In the supposed degeneracy of the New England churches of his day Cotton Mather saw the special hand of the devil; and the witches were soldiers of the prince of darkness in the same great campaign. The devil fought in all manner of ways - material and spiritual. The physical hardship of the earlier years of the colonies was largely his work; so were the disturbances raised within the colonies; so were the Indian wars; so, too, were certain phenomena that everyone at the present day would instantly recognize as natural. More than once Cotton Mather re-

marks as clearly diabolical the fact that steeples of churches are oftener struck by lightening than any other structure. And from the very earliest days of the settlement, the devil had waged his unholy war in a more subtle way still; appearing in person, or in the person of direct emissaries from the invisible world to more than a few Christians. He had constantly striven with bribes and threats to seduce them to his service. Whoever yielded to him was rewarded by the possession of supernatural power which was secretly exerted for all manner of malicious purposes. These were the witches. Whoever withstood him was tortured in mind and body almost beyond the power of men to bear. These were the bewitched. There was no phase of the devil's warfare so insidious, so dangerous, as this: in the very heart of the churches, in the pulpits themselves, witches might lurk. The witchcraft was a real attack of the devil, permitted perhaps as a punishment for dabbling in sorcery and magical tricks which people had begun to allow themselves. The afflictions of the possessed were really diabolical.

It has been wittingly said of the pious settlers of New England that "first they fell

on their knees and then they fell on the abo-
 rigines".⁽¹⁾ In the view of the Puritans, the
 Indians were the wretched remnant of a race
 seduced to the western hemisphere by the devil
 himself, that he might rule them undisturbed.
 The landing of the Pilgrims was an invasion
 of the devil's own territory; the missionary
 work of the ministers was a direct storming
 of his strongholds. The outbreak of the In-
 dian wars was his natural retort. Every
 arrow, every bullet, was a missive aimed by
 Satan himself against the power of Christ.
 The people met the attack with gunpowder; the
 clergy met it with prayer. This attitude of
 the Puritans towards the Indians accounts for
 the merciless slaughter of the latter.

Cotton Mather explains the existence of
 the devil in America in the following way.
 "When two goats were offered to the Lord on the
 day of expiation we read that one of them was
 to fall by lot to Azazel. Azazel is no other
 than the devil himself. When our Lord
 Jesus Christ underwent his humiliation for us,
 he was carried to the wilderness and there he
 was exposed to the buffetings and outrages of
 Azazel. The assaults that Satan then and after-

(1) Walter C. Bronson: "American Literature"
 Page 20

wards made on our Lord Jesus Christ producing a most horrible anguish in his mind made such a figure in his conflicts for us that they were well worthy of a most particular prefiguration. And one thing in the prefiguration must be that Azazel must be sent into the desert. In the days of Moses, it seems, deserts were counted very much an habitation of devil; and when the scriptures foretel desolations of such and such places, they still make the devils to be their inhabitants. There has been too much cause to observe that the Christians who were driven into the American desert, which is now called New England, have, to their sorrow, seen Azazel dwelling and raging there in very tragical instances. The devils have doubtless felt a more than ordinary vexation from the arrival of those christians with their sacred exercises of christianity in this wilderness, for our vexation as well as their own.

"Molestations from evil spirits in more sensible and surprising apparitions than those finer methods wherein they commonly were upon the minds of all men, but especially of ill men, have so abounded in this country, that I question whether any one town has been free from them".⁽¹⁾

This same divine warns us in "The Amour of

(1) "Magnolia"- Book VI, Chapter 7, Page 5.

Christianity", in "The Wonders of the Invisible World", and in his "Addresses to Young Men, Old Men and Little Children" that we must not imagine that one devil alone is able to vex all mankind with continued wiles. The high places of this our lower world swarm with so many wicked spirits that sometimes one poor man may be vexed with a legion of them. And Cotton Mather is particular to explain that a legion contains twelve thousand five hundred devils. They have one commander, Beelzebub, prince of devils, for there is a government, a monarchy, among them. Although they have their devilish confederacies, there are no mutinies in the armies of hell, nor do they complain of hard marches. Because these Fallen Angels are united under one monarch and upon one design, they are mentioned under the name of the singular number, the Devil. The first and chief wrath of the devil is at the Almighty God himself. However, the devil now sees man lying in the bosom of God, but himself damned in the bottom of hell. He cannot bear that man should not be so miserable as himself. In prosecution of his wrath, he often gets a liberty to make a descent upon the Children of Men, for the devil comes only with the permission of God, in some sense according to law. He is our Adversary and Accuser in the Court of Spirits where he presents his case to God

and gets permission to inflict upon the world horrible woes - plagues, wars, storms, sins, pride, wounded conscience. Moreover, the time for the devil to enjoy a dominion over the world is fixed and stated by God - until the Lord himself shall take to himself his great power and reign. The devil can give a shrewd guess when he draws near the end of his time. The sins of men at that time will be more mighty sins. There will be aggravated woes when the devil realizes his time is short - earthquakes, fires, preternatural operations, possessions, obsessions, apparitions of the devil. But immediately the question arises, how short is the devil's time? Cotton Mather reasons that if, over a thousand years previous, the devil's time were pronounced short, surely it is not a thousand years distant from those happy thousand years of rest and peace and holiness reserved for the people of God. If they are not a thousand years yet short of that Golden Age, there is cause to think they are not a hundred. There is little room to hope that the great wrath of the devil will not prove the ruin of New England in particular. He cites the Anti-Christ movement, sickness, Indian wars, and losses at sea as evidences of destruction directed by the evil one on New England.

In spite of all this sovereignty, according to

Cotton Mather, the power of the devil is limited. He must gain the unenforceable will of man into sin. The will of man cannot be forced. The will of unregenerate man is not free to that which is good, but then, on the other side, the will of no man is forced unto that which is evil. The devil undoes no man without or against his will. He may persuade a man to sin; but he cannot compel him. Man walks willingly after the temptation. If there be nothing of the will in what is done, there is not sin in it, which there would be otherwise. And if man cannot be hooked into sin, so long the devil can get no advantage over man. All the advantage man can give to the devil is by consenting with his will to some sin that is presented. Since the devil cannot win the will by downright force upon it and man must be a voluntary agent whenever he sins, the devil betakes himself unto his wiles to gain the will. It is purely by stratagem, if ever he obtains a victory. Yet, the devil has no little advantage from his great ability to outwit ignorance. He has a vast understanding. By long experience he has become skilful to destroy. The experience of more than five thousand years has taught him those wiles by which he may circumvent "the children of men who are but as yesterday and know nothing".

It is not a difficult transition from the Anti-Christ movement to the witchcraft movement which was stronger in European countries even than it was in America. Preternatural operations, possessions, apparitions, were only a few of the means employed by the devil to torment people. Witchcraft was his special prerogative. Any special sickness or accident was almost invariably ascribed to witchcraft, and people began to look about for those through whom Satan would operate. They talked of "fascinations" and tried to collect facts for strange apparitions. The skill of witches was believed to be almost unlimited. They could create storms, rend the forests, devastate by fire and plague, pinch, throttle, burn or crush a person, deprive people of reason and of life, assume any shape or apparition such as that of a dog, a black cat, a hog, a toad, a mouse, a rat, a yellow bird, a spider, ride on a stick, torment people by means of puppets, and be a thousand miles away at the time of a murder. All victims were inveigled into signing a big black book which a small black man no taller than a walking stick presented. Signature even was not necessary. To touch the book, even accidentally, was sufficient. Victims complained, when they refused to sign, that the book was held close before their eyes in such a manner

that the hand would be sure to touch the manuscript were the hand lifted to the face at all. The signature in the witch book was not the only ceremony--the devil had his sacrament. Those joining the Legion of Darkness were baptized at rivers and ponds, the Great Officer of Hell taking them up by the body and putting their heads into the water, saying over them, "Thou art mine; I have power over thee". Witch science also taught that the devil set his mark upon the bodies of his confederates, and that the place marked became callous and dead, losing utterly its sensibility, so that it might be pricked or cut without producing pain. These marks sometimes assumed the form of teats from which the imps received their nourishment. Provisions were made by legislation for a search by a jury of the same sex, a surgeon being present, of all parts of the body of an accused person. Any callous or unusual mark, such as aged persons or persons who had been subjects of special bodily inflictions were liable to have, were easily sworn to by excited, credulous people as witchmarks. Witches cast spells over their victims so they could not hear prayers, could not read the Bible, and could not speak or hear the name of God. They understood spelling, however. They would fall violently in a fit when-

ever the Bible was opened in the room, even if they did not see it opened. Victims were afflicted with pain and torment if a witch even glanced their way. The devil and his followers were always designated by the pronouns They and Them.

The Salem outbreak was not due to Puritanism; nor was it due to any peculiar temper on the part of the New Englanders; nor to any exceptional bigotry or abnormal superstition. The early settlers believed in witchcraft because they were men of their time. They shared the feelings and beliefs of the best hearts and wisest heads of the Seventeenth Century. Our ancestors of 1692 were in accord with the practically universal belief of their day. The Salem upheaval was perfectly typical. It was Matthew Hale, Chief Baron of the Exchequer, who, in 1664, pronounced from the bench in England the following opinion in the Bury St. Edmund's case. That there were such creatures as witches he made no doubt at all; "for, first, the Scriptures had affirmed so much. Secondly, the wisdom of all nations had provided Laws against such persons which is an argument of their confidence of such a crime. And such has been the judgment of his Kingdom, as appears by that Act of Parliament which has provided punishments proportionable to the quality of the offence, and de-

sired them (jury) strictly to observe their evidence; and desired the great God of Heaven to direct their hearts in this weighty thing they had in hand; For to Condemn the Innocent and to let the Guilty go Free, were both an Abomination to the Lord.⁽¹⁾ Hale was the most profound lawyer of his time and the Bury case became a precedent of great weight. Even Cotton Mather says it was a trial much considered by the judges of New England.

Mr. Upham in his book "Salem Witchcraft" lists seven causes for the 1692 disturbance: (I) The general prevalence of erroneous opinions respecting diabolical agency, (II) parish troubles in Salem Village, (III) Indian servants of Mr. Parris, (IV) Intrigue and Malice of Mr. Parris, (V) Family and neighborhood feuds of the village, (VI) Credulity of Local Magistrates, (VII) infatuation of the judges in admitting spectral testimony and adhering to the dogma that the devil⁽²⁾ could act only through willing confederates. As far as Mr. Upham is concerned, Cotton Mather had no connection with the upheaval. Of these causes, The Circle, which is the result of the influence of the Indian servants of Mr. Parris and of the intrigue and malice of Mr. Parris, seems to have the most immediate influence. Mr. Parris, who

(1) G. L. Kittredge: "Notes on Witchcraft" -Page 18

(2) W. F. Poole: "Cotton Mather and Salem Witchcraft" - Page 28

in 1691 and 1692 was the pastor of the Salem Village church and had experienced considerable trouble with his parish, had two servants, John Indian and Tituba, slaves from the Spanish West India Islands. In the West Indies they had learned the entertainment and the practice of the black art. These two servants taught the secrets of their skill to the daughter and the niece of Mr. Parris. Whether he knew and approved of their diabolical practices or not is uncertain. At least, The Circle gradually grew until there were eleven in the group. They consisted of Elizabeth Parris, nine years old; Abigail Williams, a niece of Mr. Parris, eleven years old; Ann Putnam, twelve years old; Mary Walcott, daughter of a deacon, seventeen years old; Mary Lewis, a servant in the family of Rev. John Burroughs, and afterwards of Thomas Putnam, seventeen years old; Elizabeth Hubbard, seventeen years old; Mary Warren, a servant, twenty years old; Mrs. Ann Putnam, Mrs. Pope, the Bibber woman, and an "ancient lady by the name of Goodell". They started their career with strange actions, such as creeping under benches and chairs, crawling into holes, uttering piercing cries, throwing themselves into painful positions, falling down in terrible fits, and suffering agonizing tortures. As time passed, they became very bold, accusing persons of bewitching them, such persons being brought

to trial, at which time the members of The Circle held the centre of attention. They were seized with cramps, pricked with pins, tormented by the glance or touch of the accused. They saw the black man even in the court room whispering to the defendants; they saw the spirit of the witch fly from the body in the form of a yellow bird and light on the ceiling of the room. They told most incredible stories which the accused was not allowed to deny. They shrieked piercingly as if stabbed by a knife. And all this spectral evidence had a direct influence in prejudicing the judges against the supposed witch. At first The Circle accused rather unfortunate or lonely persons. The chief cases were those of Bridget Bishop, who apparently was envied because she had exceptionally good taste in the choice of her clothes; of Giles Corey, who was disliked because he was prosperous and had a mind of his own; of Captain John Alden, son of John of the Mayflower; of Rebecca Nurse, who was retried through Cotton Mather's influence; and of Rev. John Burroughs, who had had parish troubles in Salem Village before Mr. Parris went there and of whom Cotton Mather was loud in his denunciation. Much credulity was allowed the testimony of The Circle in all these cases. As the tide of sentiment in-

creasingly favored the members of The Circle, they became bold and even bolder in accusing persons of rank in the vicinity. When they "cried out" on Rev. S. Willard, pastor of the Old South Church, on Lady Phips, the Governor's wife, and on Mrs. Hall, wife of the minister at Beverly, skepticism arose. These accusations caused a halt in the carnage at Salem. The backbone of the witchcraft movement in America was broken. The spell once broken, the judges realized that they had been duped and that innocent blood had been shed because of their decisions. Hence, they published the "Confessions of Salem Jurists" which reads in part: "We confess that we ourselves were not capable to understand nor able to withstand the mysterious delusion of the powers of darkness and the prince of the air; but were, for want of knowledge in ourselves, and better information from others, prevailed with to take up with such evidence against the accused, as on further consideration and better information, we justly fear was insufficient for touching the lives of any: whereby we fear we have been instrumental with others, though ignorantly and unwittingly, to bring upon ourselves and this people of the Lord, the guilt of innocent blood; which sin the Lord saith in
(1)
Scripture, He would not pardon".

(1) Robert Calef: "Salem Witchcraft" - Page 294.

Judgment of the whole witchcraft movement must be made in the light of the Seventeenth Century and not of the Twentieth. No juror, whether in a witch trial, or in any other case, can be more enlightened than the general run of vicinage. Many persons who have been executed for witchcraft have supposed themselves to be guilty and have actually been guilty in intent. Practically every person executed for witchcraft believed in the reality of such a crime whether he supposed himself to be guilty of it or not. The witch beliefs of New England were brought over from the mother country by the first settlers. Spectral evidence had been admitted in the examinations and trials of witches in England for a hundred years before the Salem prosecutions took place. Spectral evidence was admitted in English witch trials after such trials had ceased in Massachusetts. And trials, convictions, and executions for witchcraft occurred in England after they had come to an end in Massachusetts, and they occurred on the continent a hundred years later than that time. The public repentance and recantation of judge and jury in Massachusetts have no parallel in the history of witchcraft. Professor Kittredge in his "Notes on Witchcraft" says: "From the first pranks of the afflicted children in Mr. Parris's house in February, 1692, to the collapse of the prosecution in January, 1693,

was less than a year. During the interval twenty persons had suffered death and two are known to have died in jail. If to these we add the six sporadic cases that occurred in Massachusetts before 1692, there is a total of twenty-eight; but this is the whole reckoning, not merely for a year or two but for a complete century. The concentration of the trouble in Massachusetts within the limits of a single year has given a wrong turn to the thoughts of many writers. This concentration makes the case more conspicuous but it does not make it worse. On the contrary, it makes it better. It is astonishing that there should have been only half a dozen executions for witchcraft in Massachusetts before 1692, and equally astonishing that the delusion, when it became acute should have raged for about a year and that but twenty-two persons should have lost their lives. The facts are distinctly creditable to our ancestors, - to their moderation and to the rapidity with which their good sense could reassert itself after a brief
(1)
eclipse".

Just what Cotton Mather's influence was in the Salem witchcraft movement has been a topic of controversy for over two hundred years. His enemies say he was the instigator of the trials and the promoter of the convictions; but rational evidence seems to discredit this general accusation. Proof

points to the fact that Cotton Mather's interest ^{the} in a witchcraft movement was aroused through his interest in politics. The charter of the Massachusetts colony was gone, and Kirk as Royal Governor was coming with his redcoats. In secret prayer Cotton Mather was beseeching God to show mercy to New England and was promising, when such mercy came, any special services the Lord might see fit to demand. When King Charles died and Mather learned that Kirk actually was not coming, he felt that his prayers had saved New England from the most of her dangers. Therefore he must look about for something to do for the Lord. At that very moment witchcraft was abroad. It was his duty to collect testimony against it. His interest once aroused does not take a bloodthirsty bent, however, as his enemies would like to have us believe. That he visited those who were convicted is true - but as a spiritual adviser, not as an agent of bringing them to execution. Cotton Mather was a comforter and friend of the sufferers, especially of Proctor and of Willard. It was necessary that these persons seek spiritual advice. Proctor and Willard had been confined for several months in the Boston jail where they made Mr. Mather's acquaintance, as he was an habitual visitor of the prisons. Would these persons have asked him to be their spiritual comforter if he had been the agent

of bringing them into their imprisonment?

Cotton Mather's treatment of the Goodwin case in 1688 demonstrates quite clearly his attitude towards witchcraft. That he believed in witchcraft, that he was credulous to an astonishing degree is undeniable. That he discredited the popular treatment of such cases, that he believed many innocent persons were found guilty, is also just as undeniable. In 1688 he was called in to witness the sufferings of the four Goodwin children, the oldest of whom was thirteen years of age - the children supposedly bewitched by an Irish washwoman, one Glover. The sufferings of the children increased until the woman was brought to trial. Her house was searched and several images or puppets made of rags and stuffed with goat's hair were found. The woman confessed that she tormented her victims by rubbing the puppets with her finger after she had wet it with her spittle. In court when she seized an image, one of the children fell into a violent fit before the whole assembly. The judge, however, was apprehensive of this event, and so, he caused a repetition of the action in such a manner that the children could not see when Glover's hand was placed upon the image. Yet the child fell into a violent fit. In court

the accused woman acknowledged that she had one who was her prince. When Mather visited her, she told him she had been at meetings where her prince with four more was present. She told him the names of the four and the name of her prince, the devil. At her execution, she said the afflicted children should not be relieved by her death, for others besides her had a hand in her affliction. And her words came true.

It was the oldest of these Goodwin children whom Mather took to his home for observation. In his "Magnalia Christi Americana", he states that he took the child partly out of compassion to her parents, but chiefly to be a critical eye-witness of things that would enable him to confute the sadducism of the debauched age. When he prayed in the room the child's hands were with a strong force clapped over her ears. When her hands were pulled away by force, she cried out that she could not hear a word because They made such a noise. Sometimes an invisible chain was clasped about her at which time she would cry out in pain and in fear. Ordinarily at these times she would be pulled out of her seat towards the fire so violently that two people could scarcely keep her out of it. At other times They put an invisible

rope about her neck wherewith she was choked until she was black in the face. Although it was got off before it had killed her, there were red marks of it and of a finger and a thumb near it, to be seen for some time afterwards. Not only upon her own looking into the Bible, but upon anyone else's doing it in the room, wholly unknown to her, she would fall into tortures. She rode an invisible horse which the demons furnished her. At prayer she threw herself upon the floor at the feet of him who prayed where she whistled and sang and yelled to drown the voice of prayer. Before the prayer was over she lay as if dead, wholly senseless. In a minute or two after prayer was over, she revived and was as natural as ever. But after a while Cotton Mather, taking a particular compassion on the family, set himself to serve them in the method prescribed by the Lord Jesus Christ. Accordingly the Lord being sought three times in three days of prayer, with fasting, the family saw their deliverance perfected; and the children afterwards, all of them, not only approved themselves devout Christians, but reckoned these afflictions among the special incentives to their Christianity. In his introductory note to the reader in his "Memorable Providences", Cotton Mather says, "Pray-

er is the powerful and effectual remedy against the malicious practices of devils and those that covenant with them". And he concludes, "All that I have now to publish is, that Prayer and Faith was the thing which drove the devils from the children; and I am to bear this testimony unto the world: That the Lord is nigh to all them who call upon him in truth, and that blessed are all they that wait for him".

Although, in a consideration of Mather's treatment of this case many things seem fantastic to us, in some respects his measures were cautious. For instance, he took one of the children into his own home where he could observe ^{her} personally. Then, too, when Glover divulged to him the four who were present at the meeting with their prince, he never revealed the names of the persons "lest", he said, "we wrong the reputation of the innocent by stories not enough inquired into". That he believed in the efficacy of prayer in these cases is fully proved by his method of treatment with the Goodwin children. Beyond the fact that Mather believed there was such a thing as witchcraft, the prevalent belief of the Seventeenth Century, there is little evidence in the Goodwin case that he was a radical promoter of prosecutions in witchery. A similar method was used by this divine in the case

of Margaret Rule and of Mercy Short: the former case being described in "The Wonders of the Invisible World", and the latter in "A Brand Pluck'd From the Burning".

But almost immediately the question arises, What was Cotton Mather's attitude towards the Salem trials? Mabel Loomis Todd in her article on "Witchcraft in New England" states, "Cotton Mather is said by the best historians to be largely the originator of these outrages; and he seems to have taken a leading part in the persecutions with apparently great satisfaction and comfort in fermenting the excitement".⁽¹⁾

In the light of contrary evidence this seems to be a broad, unsupported, and unverified statement. In direct opposition to Miss Todd's assertion, W. F. Poole shows that Mather never attended one trial in any capacity - as adviser, witness, or spectator. He did visit Salem because he had compassion for the afflicted ones. He never swerved from his method of combating witchcraft by spiritual methods, even when admitting that the court magistrates had a duty to perform. Prayer was ever his method of dealing with supposed cases of witchcraft.⁽²⁾ Add to Mr. Poole's statement extracts from Mr. Mather's own works. In "The Wonders of the In-

(1) Page 177

(2) W. F. Poole: "Cotton Mather and Salem Witchcraft" - Page 39.

visible World" he says, "I do not believe that the progress of witchcraft among us is all the plot which the devil is managing in the witchcraft now among us. and it may be feared, that in the Horrible Tempest which is now upon ourselves the design of the devil is to sink that Happy Settlement of Government wherewith Almighty God has graciously inclined Their Majesties to favor us. But that which most of all Threatens us, in our present circumstances is the Misunderstanding and so the Animosity whereunto the Witchcraft now Raging has Enchanted us." (1) And in the same book:

"After that storm was raised at Salem, I did myself offer to provide meat, drink, and lodging for no less than six of the afflicted, that so an experiment might be made, whether Prayer with Fasting, upon the removal of the distress, might not put a period to the trouble then rising, without giving the civil authority the trouble of prosecuting these things.

"In short, I do humbly but freely, affirm it, there is not that man living in the world who has been more desirous than the poor man I to shelter my neighbors from the inconveniences of spectral outeries. The name of no one good person in the world ever came under any blemish by

(1) Pages 9 - 37.

means of any afflicted person that fell under my particular cognizance; yea, no one man, woman, or child ever came into any trouble for the sake of any that were afflicted, after I had once began to look after'em. How often have I had this thrown into my dish, that many years ago I had an opportunity to have brought forth such people as have in the late storm of witchcraft been complained of, but that I smothered all!"⁽¹⁾

Far from willingly fermenting the witchcraft excitement, at the very outset of the disturbance, in a letter to the judges on May 31, 1692, he advises that little credence be given "spectral evidence". The letter reads: "I must humbly beg you not to lay more stress upon pure spectral testimony than it will bear. When you are satisfied or have good, plain, legal evidence that the demons which molest our poor neighbors do indeed represent such and such people to the sufferers, though this be a presumption yet I suppose you will not reckon it a conviction that the persons so represented are witches to be immediately exterminated. It is very certain that the devils have sometimes represented the shapes of persons not only innocent, but also very virtuous".

(1) "The Wonders of the Invisible World"- Page 11.

This letter hardly sounds as if its author took great satisfaction in promoting the prosecutions. That he was credulous and superstitious even beyond his times cannot be questioned. But he did not believe in hanging people accused by devils' testimony. "Particular Gentlemen in the Government know", he says, "how many letters I have written to prevent excessive credit of spectral accusations."

In the midst of the Salem troubles the judges, as may have been expected, asked the advice of the ministers in regard to the situation. The clergy favored the authority of Perkins and Barnard, two famous English lawyers of the time, who were opposed to "spectral testimony", because the devil sometimes performed his deeds through innocent and virtuous persons. The judges held to the theory established by Sir Matthew Hale - that the devil could employ only the spectres of such persons as were in league with him. The clergy said that the compact with the Evil One must be proved by legal evidence, given by persons in use of their ordinary faculties and without the assistance of the supernatural. They questioned also the validity of the confession, thinking perhaps such persons were not in their right mind.

The trials, if conducted under these conditions, would have been altogether harmless. The concluding statement of the report of the ministers gives considerable leeway to the judges, however. "Nevertheless we cannot but humbly recommend unto the government the speedy and vigorous prosecution of such as have rendered themselves obnoxious, according to the directions given in the laws of God, and the wholesome statutes of the English nation for the detection of witchcraft"⁽¹⁾. Continually we must keep in mind that no intelligent person of the times rejected the theory of witchcraft. That being the case, the report of the ministers seems very lenient towards possible offenders. Of course, however, they realize that to err on the side of over-enthusiasm was as much a sin as to neglect to do duty. They argued that if some really guilty persons did escape, the penalty was on their own heads for such unpardonable lying. In connection with the Report of the Ministers, June 15, 1692, it is interesting to note that two years later, March 5, 1694, the President and Fellows of Harvard College proposed that the ministers of New England make a record of "The Illustrious Discoveries of the Divine Providence in the government of the world", in order that these might be studied

(1) Rev. Z. A. Mudge: "Witch Hill" - Page 105.

carefully.

That Cotton Mather felt that witchcraft had been carried too far is clearly outlined in "The Wonders of the Invisible World", where he says that many worthy persons are not a little dissatisfied at the proceedings in the prosecution of this witchcraft. In the "Magnalia Christi Americana" he outlines his reasons for so believing. The number of persons accused is too large for a place so small and of so much knowledge. Persons of quality have been accused whose thoughts he feels sure were on better things. Of the nineteen who were executed, everyone denied the crime to death. For five years there have been no molestations. Similar mistakes have been made in other countries. Why should not the same mistake be made in Salem? He says, "As to our case in Salem, I conceive it proceeded from some mistaken principles: as that Satan cannot assume the shape of an innocent person, and in that shape do mischief to the bodies and estates of mankind; and that the devil, when he doth harm to persons, in their body or estate, it is by the help of our neighbors, some witch in covenant with the devil; and that when the parties suspected look on the parties supposed to be bewitched, and they are thereupon struck down in a fit, as if struck with a cudgel, it is a

(1)
proof of such a covenant".

Hard it is to cast off modern prejudice and to judge Cotton Mather in the light of his own times. Yet a fair estimate of his work and influence can be obtained in no other way. By nature he was impulsive, sensitive, and given to excessive introspection. Proud he was and easily susceptible to flattery. Nothing but the religion of his ancestors in its most rigid form satisfied him. Like the other Puritans he knew his God intimately - a Being who must be approached through excessive sacrifice and fasting and prayer. But God would personally answer that prayer. That God was angry with New England he had no doubt; his wrath was exhibited by earthquakes, fires, and political troubles. As far as his belief in the supernatural is concerned, he is no better and no worse than his contemporaries. He simply accepts the prevailing sentiment of the Seventeenth Century. He is typical of the period, nothing else. Yet Mather in some of his scientific investigations is far in advance of his time. He advocated inoculation for small pox from a scientific standpoint, when physicians of New England opposed it from a religious standpoint. While most superstitious in some respects, he scoffs at other very popular

(1) "Magnalia" - Book VI, Page 477.

beliefs. Although Robert Calef has very little sympathy for his illustrious contemporary, we feel that Mather was sincere. Although he cherished popularity, he placed duty first. Never once did he swerve from right as it was given him to see it.

Almost innumerable instances may be cited to illustrate each of the points mentioned in the foregoing paragraph. Undoubtedly God took an intimate interest in the affairs of Major Gibbons when his vessel, by contrary winds, was kept abroad so long that supplication for deliverance was made. The provision supply was exhausted. No help forthcoming, one of the company suggested that by lot one should be singled out to die and his body used for food for the rest. When the choice was accordingly made, no one wanted to be the executioner. While they were calling upon God in their anguish, a large fish leaped into the boat, which not only satisfied their hunger but gave them promise of deliverance. It was not long, however, before they were confronted with the same problem again. The lot duly taken, the choice duly made, again no one would be the executioner. Once more their prayers were answered because a large bird lights upon the mast and stands there until it is caught. Still, disappointments follow

the second sign of deliverance. A third time they are faced with starvation and a third time the same process is pursued. Answer to their prayer is not so immediate. Yet they hesitate, waiting and lingering and hoping for a sign from heaven. A ship is spied, a French pirate. Major Gibbons offers all he has for a little bread, but the pirate happens to be one whom Gibbons has befriended in Boston. Hence they have a comfortable voyage home. In Mather's works are endless examples of this sort of thing, in which he sees the hand of God working directly in the affairs of men. It is an intimate relationship which exists between God and man. Even ejaculatory prayers have astonishing answers. A carpenter at work upon a house dropped a bulky piece of timber just over eight children who were playing on the floor below. The man cried out, "Oh, Lord, direct it". And the Lord did direct it so that it fell on end in the midst of the children and then canted along the floor between two of the children without even touching them.

Punishment for wrong doing is even more swift than answer to prayer. The Narragansett Indians have been destroyed because they harkened not to the Gospel when it was preached to

them. A sailor when prohibited from taking a pipe of tobacco because a barrel of powder was on board replied, "I will take it though the devil carry me away alive!" The powder exploded, the vessel was blown up, but all were saved except the one sailor. Of course, the devil carried him away. Many are the sufferings in New England as a result of God's wrath because the people neglect him. The crops are blasted because the people are unthankful in the enjoyment of the fruits of their harvest. Indian wars threaten because the inhabitants have degenerated into Indian vices. The great fire of October 2 and 3, 1711, is an eminent example of God's wrath. Law suits are multiplied among them because the holy place is neglected for the sake of the material land. Drinking houses encourage vice. People have forgotten why the settlement was made in the new land. Pride abounds in New England; God's name is taken in oath; the Sabbath is broken; there is promise breaking; there is opposition to the reformation; public spirit is lacking. It is not difficult for Cotton Mather to find endless reasons for God's wrath against New England. To him God was infinitely human. He aided those whom he pitied, and he punished those with whom he was angry.

That Cotton Mather was credulous, even more so than most of the people of his time, is hard to deny. In the opening sentence of "The Wonders of the Invisible World" he says, "'Tis, as I remember, the Learned Scribonius who reports that one of his Acquaintance, devoutly making his Prayer on the behalf of a Person molested by Evil Spirits, received from the Evil Spirits an horrible Blow over the face! And I may myself expect not a few or small Buffetings from Evil Spirits for the Endeavours wherewith I am now going to encounter them." Even in his scientific investigations his credulity is evident. In all seriousness in a letter to Mr. Woodward of the Royal Society, he describes a Triton observed on February 22, 1716, off the Connecticut shore between Milford and Brainford. The creature had a head, face, neck, shoulders, arms, elbows, breast, and back, - all of human shape, only the arms were a little more than half the length of a man's. The hair was of grayish color. The lower parts were those of a fish, and colored like a mackerel. The tail was forked and there were two fins about half a foot above the tail. The whole animal was about five or six feet in length. Could there be a more startling example of gullability in scientific investigation? Con-

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trast, however, with the foregoing, Mather's statement as to the relationship of philosophy and religion. "Philosophy is no Enemy, but a mighty and wondrous incentive to Religion and they will exhibit that Philosophical religion which will carry with it a most sensible character, and victorious evidence of a reasonable service. I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, of which I will affirm constantly that if the philosopher do not call it in, he paganizes and leaves the finest and brightest part of his work unfinished."⁽¹⁾ Can any statement of the reconciliation of philosophy and religion be more modern? Add also this example of discredit of the curative power of the seventh son. Mr. Joseph Web had consulted Mr. Mather on this subject as a possible cure for his scrofulous child. Mather replied, "Ye opinion and Expectation of Curing ye King's Evil, by ye Touch of a Seventh Son is not only a Vulgar Error, but also a very Foolish One. Even the King's custom of touching for the evil is managed with a very unjustifiable Superstition".⁽²⁾ Furthermore, Mr. Mather states in "Essays to do Good": "Some diseases that seem incurable are easily cured by agreeable conversation. Disorders of the mind

(1) Cotton Mather: "The Christian Philosopher" Introduction.

(2) G. L. Kittredge: "Cotton Mather's Scientific Communications to the Royal Society" - Page 34.

first bring diseases on the stomach; and so the whole mass of blood gradually becomes infected: and as long as the mental cause continues, the diseases may indeed change their form, but they rarely quit the patients. Tranquillity of mind will do wonderful things towards the relief of
 (1)
 bodily maladies".

It is difficult to reconcile these examples of modern thought with the almost silly superstition of the witchcraft movement. Because of these opposing phases of Mather's nature, it is almost impossible to make a just estimate of his accomplishments and influences. That Mather did not share the skepticism of Robert Calef is hardly to his discredit. It is possible that Calef would not have inquired into the mysteries of the prevalent beliefs if he had not quarreled with Mather. Undoubtedly in his "More Wonders of the Invisible World" he is attacking Mather's activity in order to undermine the latter's popularity. A man in public life, prominent as Mather was, invariably incurs the animosity of persons of inferior minds.

As Phillip G. Nordell says, "Easy it would be to characterize Cotton Mather as a ranting moralizer or a credulous old fool". But it is not fair to judge him ruthlessly by our modern standards. He lived during a period of political,

(1) Cotton Mather: "Essays to do Good" -
 Page 121.

philosophical, and religious transition. He championed the losing cause - that of theocracy in New England. Accepting free will he could have held his old leadership with the progressive element, but he remained orthodox to the end, and loyal to the principles on which New England was founded. He was a man of great passion which to him sometimes was divine, sometimes diabolical. Kenneth B. Murdock fittingly says in his book, "Cotton Mather": "Today one still finds Cotton Mather denounced as a persecutor of witches, the colossal pedant, the epitome of narrowness and bigotry of the Puritans, or, less often, defended as a walking type of righteousness, eulogized to the point of lifelessness and unreality. Neither view does him justice. Neither view lets the real fascination of his character appear. He was human in his shortcomings, deservedly famous for his good works, and to know him well is to understand a man whose nature abounds in baffling inconsistencies, and who is more interesting because he defies reduction to the limits of a type. He is no pale, historical abstraction, but an intensely active individual. He would be far less interesting if he were not so decidedly a complex creation of flesh and blood."⁽¹⁾

(1) Introduction - Pages XXIV and XXV.

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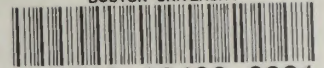
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